

Message Text

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 LONDON 06880 01 OF 03 021715Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-11 ISO-00 HA-05 VO-05 CA-01 CIAE-00
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R 021648Z MAY 78
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5709
INFO AMEMBASSY DACCA
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LONDON 06880

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, SHUM, UK
SUBJECT: IMMIGRATION AND RACE: THE DEBATE CONTINUES

REF: LONDON 5153

SUMMARY: SOMEWHAT UNEXPECTEDLY, THE GOVERNMENT REJECTED
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE CONTROVERSIAL REPORT OF THE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION AND RACE RELATIONS
(REFTEL). THE CONSERVATIVES SHORTLY THEREAFTER OUTLINED
VARIOUS CHANGES THEY WOULD ENACT TO RESTRICT ASIAN
IMMIGRATION, IF RETURNED TO POWER. REACTION TO THE
TORY PROPOSALS WAS NOT UNIFORMLY FAVORABLE. THOUGH
CRITICIZED BY THE QUALITY PRESS, A NUMBER OF LEADING
TORIES, RACE RELATIONS GROUPS AND LABOR, THE NEW
CONSERVATIVE POLICY APPEARS TO HAVE HAD A FAVORABLE
IMPACT ON THE ELECTORATE, AS MEASURED BY OPINION POLLS,
BUT LITTLE DISCERNIBLE EFFECT ON RECENT BY-ELECTIONS.
CRITICISM OF THE TORY POLICY HAS FOCUSED LARGELY ON
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 LONDON 06880 01 OF 03 021715Z

ITS FAILURE TO ADDRESS THE RACE RELATIONS QUESTION AND
THE FACT THAT WHILE ITS PURPORTED PURPOSE IS TO REDUCE
ASIAN IMMIGRATION, IT WOULD APPARENTLY HAVE A FAR
GREATER EFFECT ON IMMIGRATION FROM THE "OLD COMMONWEALTH"
(CANADA, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND) AND THE U.S. BY
OPTING TO CONFRONT THE IMMIGRATION/RACE ISSUE HEAD ON,
THE GOVERNMENT APPEARS TO BE GAMBLING THAT THE CONSER-

VATIVE ADVANTAGE ON THE ISSUE WILL NOT BE DECISIVE IN A GENERAL ELECTION. OPINION POLL DATA, THOUGH EQUIVOCAL, SUGGESTS THAT THE GOVERNMENT MAY BE CORRECT. END SUMMARY.

1. THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE CONTROVERSIAL REPORT OF THE COMMONS' SELECT COMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION AND RACE RELATIONS (REFTEL) WAS MORE RAPID THAN EXPECTED AND FAR MORE CONFRONTATIONAL THAN WE HAD ANTICIPATED. SPEAKING TO COMMONS APRIL 6, THE DAY BEFORE TORY DEPUTY LEADER WHITELAW WAS DUE TO ANNOUNCE HIS PARTY'S LONG-AWAITED POLICY ON IMMIGRATION, HOME SECRETARY REES FLATLY REJECTED THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS THAT: AN ANNUAL QUOTA BE ESTABLISHED FOR INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT ENTRANTS; ENTRY BE REFUSED TO DEPENDENTS OVER TEN YEARS OF AGE; AND A NEW SYSTEM OF INTERNAL CONTROL OVER IMMIGRANTS AND NON-RESIDENT ENTRANTS BE ADOPTED. HE REAFFIRMED THAT BRITAIN WOULD REMAIN A MULTI-RACIAL SOCIETY AND WOULD HONOR ITS PREVIOUS COMMITMENTS TO UK PASSPORT HOLDERS AND OTHERS. REGARDING THE QUOTA PROPOSAL, REES STATED THAT INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT IMMIGRATION WAS DECLINING STEADILY AND THAT IT HAD FALLEN TO 28,000 IN 1977 FROM 37,000 IN 1976 -- "THERE WILL BE NO FURTHER PRIMARY IMMIGRATION IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE", EXCEPT FOR THOSE TO WHOM BRITAIN HAS A SPECIFIC OBLIGATION, INCLUDING THOSE ARISING FROM MEMBERSHIP IN THE EC. CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 LONDON 06880 01 OF 03 021715Z

HE ALSO INDICATED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL STUDY THE COMMITTEE'S OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS, AND PROMISED A WHITE PAPER ON THE SUBJECT (A WHITE PAPER ON THE COMMITTEE'S 1976/77 REPORT WAS ISSUED IN LATE APRIL). PREDICTABLY, THE HOME SECRETARY'S STATEMENT RECEIVED PROMINENT MEDIA COVERAGE -- GENERALLY FAVORABLE -- AND REDUCED THE IMPACT OF WHITELAW'S ANNOUNCEMENT THE FOLLOWING DAY.

2. THE QUESTION OF HOW TO PLAY THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE -- WHETHER TO ACCEPT MOST OF THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS OR TO MEET THE ISSUE HEAD ON -- WAS A MATTER OF CONSIDERABLE DEBATE AT NUMBER 10. WE UNDERSTAND THAT CALLAGHAN'S POLITICAL ADVISOR, TOM MCNALLY, ARGUED FORCEFULLY FOR THE SOFT OPTION, MAINTAINING THAT BY ACCEPTING MOST OF THE BIPARTISAN COMMITTEE'S PROPOSALS, THE AREA OF ATTACK OPEN TO THE TORIES WOULD BE SHARPLY REDUCED AND THE CONSERVATIVE PROPOSALS COULD BE DISCREDITED AS BEING OVERTLY PARTISAN. LABOR, HE SUGGESTED, COULD ALSO SCORE SOME POINTS BY HIGHLIGHTING CONSERVATIVE DIFFERENCES ON THE IMMIGRATION/RACE ISSUE. REES, HOWEVER, ARGUED THAT SOME OF THE REPORT'S RECOMMENDATIONS WERE MORALLY UNTENABLE AND THAT ADOPTION OF THESE

RECOMMENDATIONS, GIVEN LABOR'S TRADITIONAL STAND ON THE
ISSUE, WOULD BE PERCEIVED AS CYNICAL AND OPPORTUNISTIC.

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PAGE 01 LONDON 06880 02 OF 03 021803Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-11 ISO-00 HA-05 VO-05 CA-01 CIAE-00
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 03 LONDON 06880

HE ALSO NOTED THAT THE COURSE OF ACTION HE PROPOSED WOULD
SAFEGUARD PARTY UNITY AND SUGGESTED THAT BY FACING THE
ISSUE AT THIS JUNCTURE, ITS POLITICAL IMPACT WOULD
GRADUALLY BE ERODED. TO SUPPORT THE LATTER CONTENTION
HE WAS ABLE TO DRAW ON OPINION RESEARCH RECENTLY DONE
BY MARKET AND OPINION RESEARCH INTERNATIONAL (MORI),
WHICH IS UNDER CONTRACT TO THE LABOR PARTY. CALLAGHAN
AGREED WITH REES.

3. WHITELAW'S APRIL 7 PRESENTATION OF THE NEW TORY
POLICY, BEFORE A LOYAL CONSERVATIVE AUDIENCE, WAS
SOMEWHAT SOFTER THAN MANY TORIES WOULD HAVE LIKED AND
WAS DELIVERED WITH UNCHARACTERISTIC ASSERTIVENESS.
BASICALLY, THE CONSERVATIVE POLICY, IF ENACTED, WOULD:
RESTRICT THE ENTRY RIGHTS OF DEPENDENTS OF BONA FIDE
IMMIGRANTS; ESTABLISH STRICTER CONTROLS ON THE ISSUANCE
OF WORK PERMITS; EXCLUDE HUSBANDS AND FIANCES OF UK
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 LONDON 06880 02 OF 03 021803Z

CITIZENS AND IMMIGRANTS UNLESS THEY HAD A PARENT OR GRANDPARENT BORN IN THE UK; ESTABLISH A REGISTER OF DEPENDENTS; AND END THE PRACTICE OF GRANTING IMMIGRANT STATUS TO TEMPORARY RESIDENTS (E.G., WORK OR EDUCATION PERMITS) AFTER FIVE YEARS IN THE UK. THE CONSERVATIVES WOULD HOLD THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A QUOTA FOR THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT IN ABEYANCE, UNLESS THERE WERE AN UPTURN IN SUCH IMMIGRATION, AND PROPOSED A SPECIAL STUDY OF WHETHER TO ESTABLISH A SPECIAL IDENTITY CARD SYSTEM AS A MEANS FOR CONTROLLING ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION. WHITELAW DID NOT SPELL OUT THE NUMERICAL EFFECT THESE PROPOSALS WOULD HAVE ON CURRENT LEVELS OF IMMIGRATION AND ADDRESSED THE RACE RELATIONS QUESTION ONLY TANGENTIALLY.

4. ACCORDING TO SUNDAY TIMES POLITICAL EDITOR HUGO YOUNG -- WHO IS WELL CONNECTED WITH THE TORIES -- WHITELAW'S AGGRESSIVENESS IN DESCRIBING THE NEW IMMIGRATION POLICY WAS DESIGNED TO DISARM THOSE ELEMENTS IN THE PARTY WHO FAVORED MORE DRACONIAN APPROACHES TO THE IMMIGRATION "PROBLEM".

5. COMMENTARY ON THE TORY PLAN WAS GENERALLY UNFAVORABLE. THE QUALITY PRESS WAS UNIFORMLY CRITICAL ON THE GROUNDS THAT IT DID NOTHING TO HELP RACE RELATIONS -- A KEY CONSIDERATION IN THEIR EYES -- AND THAT ITS IMPLICATIONS MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN THOUGHT THROUGH. NOR WAS IT WELCOMED BY ALL CONSERVATIVES. REGINALD MAUDLING, PETER WALKER AND A NUMBER OF YOUNGER TORY MPS WERE CRITICAL OF ITS THRUST AND THE FEDERATION OF CONSERVATIVE STUDENTS CONDEMNED IT AS HYPOCRITICAL IN THAT IT IMPLIED "THE NUMBER OF COLORED PEOPLE CAN BE DRAMATICALLY REDUCED BY STOPPING IMMIGRATION". FORMER CONSERVATIVE LEADER HEATH WITHHELD COMMENT "AT THE MOMENT". RACE

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 LONDON 06880 02 OF 03 021803Z

RELATIONS GROUPS, INCLUDING THE COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY HEADED BY FORMER TORY MINISTER DAVID LANE, WERE UNANIMOUS IN THEIR CONDEMNATION, AS WERE VIRTUALLY ALL ELEMENTS OF THE LABOR PARTY. THE ENSUING DEBATE FEATURED MRS. THATCHER'S REJECTION OF AN APPEAL (FROM MAUDLING) THAT SHE AND CALLAGHAN GET TOGETHER TO TRY "TO DISPEL FEARS (ABOUT IMMIGRATION) THAT ARE UNJUSTIFIED AND TO IMPROVE RACE RELATIONS"; THE OBSERVATION (BY LABOR WEEKLY) THAT HAD THE CONSERVATIVE PROPOSALS BEEN IN EFFECT IN 1947, PRINCE PHILLIP WOULD NOT HAVE

BEEN ADMITTED TO MARRY PRINCESS ELIZABETH; AND ALLEGATIONS BY WHITELAW THAT CALLAGHAN HAD ORDERED THE SLOW-DOWN OF PROCESSING IMMIGRANT APPLICATIONS. CALLAGHAN VEHEMENTLY DENIED THE CHARGE AND, FOLLOWING A PUBLIC EXCHANGE OF LETTERS, WHITELAW WITHDREW THE SUGGESTION. BUT PERHAPS THE MOST INTERESTING AND TELLING CRITIQUE OF THE CONSERVATIVE PROPOSALS CAME FROM LABOR'S RIGHT-WING MANIFESTO GROUP. DRAWING ON OFFICIAL IMMIGRATION STATISTICS, IT CLAIMED THAT IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TORY POLICY WOULD HAVE ONLY A MINIMAL EFFECT ON ASIAN IMMIGRATION, WHILE CUTTING THE INWARD FLOW FROM CANADA, AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND AND THE U.S. DRAMATICALLY, AND BACKED THIS UP WITH FIGURES. THE PLAN, ACCORDING TO THE MANIFESTOITES, WAS A FRAUD. THE MEDIA, OF COURSE, GAVE AND CONTINUES TO GIVE HEAVY COVERAGE TO ALL ASPECTS OF THE DEBATE.

6. BUT WHAT OF THE PUBLIC? THEIR REACTION TO THE CONSERVATIVE PLAN, AS MEASURED BY VARIOUS OPINION POLLS, WAS GENERALLY FAVORABLE. ALTHOUGH THE TORIES HAD PREVIOUSLY ENJOYED A SUBSTANTIAL LEAD OVER LABOR ON THIS ISSUE, THEIR LEAD INCREASED -- UP FIVE POINTS IN APRIL OVER MARCH, ACCORDING TO GALLUP. A MORE DETAILED SCRUTINY OF THE POLL DATA, HOWEVER, WOULD SEEM TO GIVE

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 LONDON 06880 02 OF 03 021803Z

CONFIDENTIAL

NNN

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 01 LONDON 06880 03 OF 03 021715Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 03 OF 03 LONDON 06880

THE CONSERVATIVES PAUSE. THEIR VOTER PREFERENCE LEAD OVER LABOR DECLINED FROM SEVEN POINTS IN MARCH TO A STATISTICALLY INSIGNIFICANT TWO POINTS IN APRIL, WHILE THE SALIENCY OF THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE DECREASED (BUT STILL REMAINED IN FOURTH PLACE), DESPITE THE NEW POLICY, ATTENDANT DEBATE AND EXTENSIVE MEDIA COVERAGE. MOREOVER, LABOR'S LEAD IN THE LOWER SALIENCY RACE RELATIONS ISSUE INCREASED, AS DID PUBLIC CONCERN ABOUT IT. AND WHILE THE CONSERVATIVES DID QUITE WELL IN THREE APRIL BY-ELECTIONS, NEITHER OPINION RESEARCH NOR OTHER, MORE SUBJECTIVE, INDICATORS SUGGESTED THAT IMMIGRATION OR RACE RELATIONS HAD A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON VOTING BEHAVIOR.

7. AS WAS PREVIOUSLY THE CASE, WE REMAIN SKEPTICAL THAT THE IMMIGRATION/RACE ISSUE WILL PROVE TO BE A DECISIVE FACTOR IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. THE CONTINUED
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PAGE 02 LONDON 06880 03 OF 03 021715Z

DECLINE IN ITS SALIENCY, DESPITE THE ATTENTION FOCUSED ON IT, SHOWS NO SIGN OF ABATING. IN THIS REGARD, A DIRECTOR OF THE GALLUP ORGANIZATION RECENTLY TOLD AN EMBOFF THAT HE BELIEVED THE IMMIGRATION QUESTION HAD PEAKED TOO EARLY (IN MARCH) FOR MRS. THATCHER, AND THAT IT PROBABLY WOULD NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON A FALL GENERAL ELECTION. IN THIS REGARD HE WAS ECHOING THE VIEW OF LABOR'S OPINION RESEARCHER, MORI. AT THIS POINT, ACCORDINGLY, IT DOES NOT APPEAR THAT IMMIGRATION WILL PROVE TO BE THE CUTTING ISSUE MANY CONSERVATIVES HAD HOPED IT WOULD BE. BUT IT SEEMS EVIDENT THAT IMMIGRATION/RACE WILL RECEIVE MORE EMPHASIS THAN MOST OTHER NON-ECONOMIC ISSUES IN THE MONTHS TO COME, AND THEREFORE MERITS OUR CONTINUED OBSERVATION.

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